

BERESHITH "IN THE BEGINNING"

A Newsletter
for Beginners,
by Beginners

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בס"ד

בראשית

MATZAH BA'MIDBAR (IN THE DESERT)

F. Weiss

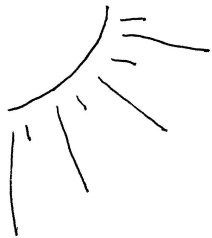
I haven't always been living here in Israel. Nor was I always observant. In fact, I took many backwards steps in order to later take huge leaps forward to be where and who I am today.

Twenty-four years ago, I came to Israel for a "year" program. I wanted to maximize my experience-of-a-lifetime in the land to which I felt deeply connected. I yearned for an authentic experience beyond getting on and off a tour bus. But I spent my first Passover backwards... in Egypt of all places.

For an exciting spring break, I registered for a week-long Sinai trip, which, I was assured, would have *matzah* for those who observed Passover. I'd always eaten *matzah* (never bread!) during the week of Passover. I had matzah at home; my work cafeteria offered *matzah* with salad platters; and even when dining at the exclusive NYC Russian Tea Room while on vacation during Passover, I was served *matzah* in a bread basket. *Matzah* during Passover was a no-brainer! That's what a Jew does, and it feels right!

Prepared with my matzah-assured traveling plans, I remember thinking that it would be like reliving the time of the Jews wandering in the wilderness, the *midbar*. I too would eat *matzah ba'midbar*! It didn't dawn on me then that I was traveling in the wrong direction, back to Egypt for Passover.

(cont. on p. 2)



FREEDOM WITH FAMILY

Rabbi Dovid Asher

The most memorable moments from my family's Passover seders always seem to include the *afikoman*. I remember hiding the *afikoman* under the oven, in the tablecloth, in the cabinet, and many other places. Grandpa, however, would never give up and would find it no matter what it would take! There were rules, such as the *afikomen* could only be hidden on the first floor and certain furniture was off limits, etc. My grandfather was tenacious and never gave up, so attaining the promised prize was extremely challenging - although the consolation prize usually wasn't too bad either.

In some families, the grandchildren seek out the *afikoman* and in others, it's the grandparents' job. Some have designated other family members or friends to do the honors. No matter whose job it is, these traditions emphasize how family and community are essential parts of a seder. It makes me distinctly aware of how special it is to celebrate the seder surrounded by friends and family, and also reminds me of the great shame that there are so many Jews today who might not have a seder or (cont. on p. 3)

TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT

Alina Gorbach

The first Passover that I kept according to the standards of Jewish law, I remember being deeply torn over eating a bag of Lay's potato chips that were kosher, but not kosher-for-Passover.

I was in the middle of my college campus, studying for midterms and feverishly trying to make-up for the work I missed because of my days off during the holiday. I was rushing between classes, and I was too far to make it to my dorm for an approved "KFP" snack. I bought the bag of potato chips thinking, "What could possibly be in this bag that consists of grain? Does G-d really care if I eat something not 100% ok, when I am so hungry?" I was standing in the middle of a sunlit courtyard, intensely staring at a bag of potato chips in a Hamlet-esque moment, and then I thought about all that had happened in my life up until that defining chip moment.

In truth, there had been countless defining moments, beginning with arriving at college and, for the first time, having independence. No more curfews, no more yard work, no more household chores, and yes to parties, parties and more parties. (cont. on p. 2)

MATZAH BA'MIDBAR (cont. from p. 1)...

Crossing the Egyptian border, it felt unsettling to leave Israel. But once we had embarked on our Sinai trek, far away from civilization, I felt safe and unburdened. All of our gear was carried by camels. The desert was beautiful and serene. At one with nature in the same *midbar* where our people had wandered before entering the "Promised Land" of Israel, this was sure to be the enlightening desert experience that I longed for.

Throughout our trek, we walked and talked, examined different rocks, listened to our guides, and took in the beautiful scenery. We ate vegetables, fruit and tuna sandwiches (on *matzah* of course) for lunch; then with added *koach* (strength), we continued walking onward. It was important to drink a lot while exerting ourselves in the desert, but we found no Miriam's Well full of fresh water in unlimited abundance such as had miraculously accompanied the Israelites throughout their desert journey. Instead, we were offered bottles of water with Egyptian labels, supplied by our Bedouin guides.

At the end of our daily desert treks, upon arrival at our campsite, we were famished. Given the venue, we were without communications (no cell phones back then). We just relaxed, not that we had any worries from which to unwind, and we contemplated. Everyone looked forward to chow time and to eventually sleeping beneath the stunning starlit sky.

For dinner, our Bedouin guides prepared sumptuous meals, that everyone, except me, eagerly anticipated. Every night I would eat *matzah* with my dinner and would feel satiated. But inevitably, I would lose my appetite. This happened every night and the reason was: Bedouin bread ("*aisb*" in Arabic), which by definition, is a popular type of flatbread in the Sinai. It was a well-kneaded dough of flour and water, often with a bit of salt, *za'atar* or other savory spices, shaped like a pancake and cooked on an upside-down wok-like dome over a campfire. No, it had no leavening agent like yeast, but it was bread nonetheless. While it might have taken less than 18 minutes from start to finish, it was definitely not *matzah*!

The first night only the Bedouins ate their Bedouin bread. But progressively, every night thereafter, more people were sampling what seemed to be a divine delicacy. By the end of our desert stay, I was the only person who had stayed away from the bread. I wasn't even tempted; I was just downright sad. I sat physically alone and apart, so that I wouldn't reveal my tears. This was Passover, for G-d's sake, and I had thought I was with a group of Jews who identified like me, and cared. But I was let down, big-time. As the others sat together devouring bread during Passover, I was taking in the desert isolation.

At the end of our trek, we reached our destination, a configuration of rocks claimed to be Mount Sinai. We rose before the crack of dawn, so that we could climb this so-called "humble" mountain. (By the way, from what I understand, there is no archaeological proof that this is the mountain where Moses received the Torah.) I felt invigorated and looked forward to being inspired in a holy kind of way. As we reached the mountain's summit, everyone arranged their cameras to get ready for that perfect sacred sunrise shot. In those pre-digital days, you could never know if yours would be "the" photo to behold... until you got your film developed. In any case, I kept the picture in my

mind's eye. But I was disappointed. There was nothing particularly holy or Jewish on that mountaintop, certainly not the St. Catherine's Monastery. Awesome, inspiring nature is definitely holy, but it was not the holy experience that I was expecting.

I realized then and there that I needed to get back to Israel, where I belonged.

The actual highlight of my Passover vacation was coming back through the border crossing into Israel. Seeing the Israeli flag flying high was a real high! I thought to myself that no matter how beautiful the nature had been on my vacation, in the future, I would choose to celebrate Passover in a holy way in Israel, my new home!

I believe that my backward time in the Sinai desert during that Passover helped propel me forward later in life to embrace my "freedom" and to tap into my Jewish *neshama* (soul). I decided to seriously delve into Judaism, to learn more about the deep meanings of Passover and everything else about Judaism, and to ultimately become a Jewish woman dedicated to Torah and *mitzvot*.

Thank G-d for the last 23 years, I've had the *z'chut* (merit) to celebrate Passover in a meaningful way, and to relish lots of happy *matzah* moments with my own family in *Eretz Israel*!

Lshana ha'baah b'Yerushalayim ha'benuya! (Next year, in the rebuilt Jerusalem!)

The writer lives with her family in Yerushalayim Ir HaKodesh.



TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT (cont. from p. 1)...

Later, I was astounded when my freedom to party did not lead to me over-brimming with happiness. In fact, just the opposite. Though I was successful in my schoolwork, enjoyed what I was learning, had a close group of friends and could party *ad nauseam*, I was feeling the most sunken, disillusioned, and depressed than I ever had. Everything that I had been taught by society that was supposed to make me feel gratified, was failing miserably.

I yearned for my family, and the only place I did feel "happy" was when I was at Shabbat dinner or helping the Chabad family on campus prepare for Shabbat or any other Jewish event. And like any other person who finds something that brings him/her happiness, I just kept putting myself into situations where I could connect to Judaism.

How could helping others make me happy? How could connecting to my Judaism that I had neglected in all but my identification my entire life make me feel fulfilled? It didn't make sense in the hyper-rationalist model of hedonist philosophy into which I had been indoctrinated. I guess I had to scratch that philosophy.

Over the next months, I gradually came to learn about the real meaning of freedom. In Jewish thought there are different types of freedom. The lowest is *chofesh*, the freedom to not work. Coming to college and finding my independence, I was really only experiencing the lowest level of freedom. Rebellious against the constrictions my parents had

(cont. on p. 3)

FREEDOM WITH FAMILY (cont. from p. 1)...a place to go to re-experience the wonders of the exodus.

Celebrating the seder alone is the antithesis of what the seder experience is supposed to be.

Thousands of years ago, when the Passover holiday first began and when the exodus was first commemorated, the Jewish people were obligated to dine together. This point is driven home by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (19th century Germany) in his commentary on Exodus 12:43, which can help us appreciate how central the idea of togetherness, of unity, is to the essence of the night of Passover:

“In the Pesach offering, the Jewish Nation asserts all its members, assembled in family groups, as G-d’s flock and at His disposal, and then, in eating the same, it receives itself back, freed from physical and civic death. This is the bond between G-d and Israel, which has eternally to be renewed...”

Just imagine. In ancient times there was a national gathering, and everyone had a group to belong to at all times. Not one person was ever left behind, and no one was even allowed to celebrate Passover alone. In fact, these groups were required to include both men and women and were also supposed to consist of different age groups. After all, this was a national liberation, a national experience, and you can’t relive that without complete inclusion. (Of course, there are extenuating circumstances like tours of duty for military personnel or hospitalizations, but the ideal is to focus on community as described above.) This focus on all types of people coming together for the Passover seder stresses the importance of unity.

Unity is a unique quality. A unified group has the ability to unnaturally withstand outside forces and becomes uniquely suited to get exponentially better results than otherwise expected. Think of Benjamin Franklin, “We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately.” In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. While many people think that they need to



stick together to support each other, a more important effect of unity is that it makes the nation as a whole closer and tighter knit.

The feeling of unity often comes from shared experiences, both good and bad. Imagine that you are on a road trip with some friends, and you get a flat tire. Then you realize that your provisions spoiled, so you need to subsist on just snacks. Another friend keeps everybody up at night with a snoring problem. The long hours of driving makes everyone bleary eyed. All of these small nuisances begin to add up, but each becomes a memory that is shared for a lifetime.

This is also true on a more macrocosmic level. The Jewish nation had more significant issues to deal with than a flat tire, and these crucible-like moments formed a sense of oneness. The mutual experience of the torturous slavery in Egypt followed by the jubilation of emancipation through G-d’s miracles was a great bonding force for the Children of Israel. These experiences enabled the unity that we are told was a prerequisite for the receiving of the Torah. One recurrent idea underlying the narrative of the exodus is the rock solid connection that the Israelites must have felt for one another.

This oneness was noted when the Torah describes the Jewish people as being *ish echod b'lev echod* (each person with one heart) right before they received the Torah at Mount Sinai. After so many years of oppression there was a strong brotherhood and sisterhood that allowed the Israelites to be worthy of receiving the Torah. All the hardship became worth it for that one moment.

Why did the Al-mighty make unity such a necessary component for receiving the Torah? When people spend time with each other, they identify with one another and they are better able to empathize with one another. So if my friend is hurting, then I’m hurting too. If my friend is happy, I’m happy. This makes our relationship stronger. The same is true with the nation of Israel. When Israel is together then it is whole - we rejoice together, we mourn together, we stand together and we fulfill many mitzvot. But if Israel is separate, then it is broken and each group or individual looks out only for themselves.

National unity was essential for achieving the freedom that we first attained upon leaving Egypt and accepting the Torah, the freedom we celebrate on Passover. In Egypt, we went from serving a king, who had the worst intentions for us and led us toward destruction, to serving the King of kings, Who only had our best interests in mind. The sense of unity among the people reinforced the values and principles that defined them, and this allowed them to fully understand the power of their independence.

The unity that was necessary then is still critical today. When we relive the tragedies of life under Pharaoh and the triumph of passing through the sea, we too need our families and each other to properly reassure ourselves that there is still that same wonderful goal of spiritual freedom to be achieved together. *Chag Samayach!*”

A native of Allentown, Pennsylvania, Rabbi Dovid Asher is the rabbi at Keneseth Beth Israel in Richmond, Virginia.

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TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT (cont. from p. 2)... previously placed on me was a very empty and low-level feat. I placed endless phone calls to my old friends from high school trying to find someone who experienced the same sense of disillusionment with the raptures of college life as I did, but to no avail.

However, in my dorm I found a new friend who kept Shabbat. She wouldn’t let me turn on lights for her on Shabbat because I was Jewish also. That stung. It stung because I didn’t know how I felt about not being allowed to do something because I was Jewish. Upon further inquiry, she informed me that it is a sin for a Jew to cause another Jew to do something forbidden. I couldn’t protest that I didn’t care that it was a sin, because I had never bothered to think about (cont. on p. 4)



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TO EAT OR NOT TO EAT (*cont. from p. 3*)...my relationship with sin, or Jewish sins, or being a Jew who sins under G-d. Further investigation was required.

The highest level of freedom is *cheirut*, a feeling of spiritual freedom and purpose in life. Passover is called *Z'man Chay'roo'tay'noo*, the Time of Our Freedom, because it is only by becoming a people and accepting the Torah that the Jews obtained true freedom. Connecting with my Jewish self was not an easy process. There were many impossibly hard truths that I needed to recognize: that I never prioritized respecting my parents or elders, that not loving my fellow Jew is the same as



not loving myself, and that my ego/animal soul had been the driving factor in most of my decisions to date. In fact, I wasn't even sure if I had ever made a decision without my animal soul winning before I learned about the concept of an animal soul. In hindsight, that all seems like the opposite of freedom.

To be honest, I do not remember if I ate the potato chips that afternoon. I would like to think that I had control over my hunger, and threw them away in an overly dramatic gesture. But, I was only just beginning to understand the vast difference between *chofesh* and *cheirut*. Sometimes having control over oneself is not so simple, and it takes an understanding of what is right and wrong and what one is meant to do. It takes a long time, and an ever-growing ability to forgo instant gratification (and potato chips).

Born in Odessa, Ukraine, Alina emigrated with her family to Cleveland, OH, in 1991. She attended the University of Rochester, majoring in Economics, and was greatly impacted by the amazing Chabad on Campus led by Rabbi Asher and Devorah Leah Yaras. She studied abroad in Hebrew University for a semester, and was able to get a scholarship through Chabad to spend winter break in Israel studying at Mayanot seminary. She was set up with her husband, Roman, while working in NYC in banking regulation. She currently lives in Highland Park with her husband and son, and works as a Pricing Analyst.

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